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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1904

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RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2020

TAGS: PGOV PINR TU

SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM: AKP MAY NOT HAVE ENOUGH VOTES WITHIN THE PARTY

REF: ANKARA 33

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) Huseyin Celik, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Vice Chairman in charge of promotion and the media, elected deputy, close confidant of PM Erdogan, a.:QQ^se a constitutional amendment in the current environment, that it would pass to a referendum. There are 337 voting members in AKP (Note: The parliament speaker, an AKP deputy, cannot vote. End Note) Celik indicated that there are at least eight deputies in the party who disagree with the idea of changing the constitution.

¶2. (C) In a press interview which Celik invited us to attend before our meeting began, he said the Republican People's Party (CHP), Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) have all said they oppose reform, yet certain fundamental changes are needed because the current constitution is out of date, much like a "tailored jacket that no longer fits its wearer." But he told us afterwards in private that the AKP is examining the question of constitutional reforms in depth, and considering reaching out to the MHP to get its support for certain consensus objectives.

¶3. (C) Comment: Celik's admission that there is dissension inside the party over reforming the constitution is not surprising, but it is somewhat startling to hear that Celik believes deputies would vote against PM Erdogan's wishes (albeit in secret); that is, that engaging party discipline would not be enough to achieve the desired outcome. Equally surprising is the admission that the AKP would try to work with the MHP to try to find common ground. Although the two parties were able to cooperate to pass a (now defunct) law to allow university students to wear headscarves, relations between PM Erdogan and MHP leader Devlet Bahceli have been famously acerbic, and MHP has been vocal in its opposition to constitutional reform of any sort. AKP would have to choose carefully the reforms it intends to implement in order to curry MHP's favor, which would almost certainly rule out restructuring the judiciary or accommodating the Kurds.  
Jeffrey

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